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SEARCH FOR AN INVULNERABLE MISSILE

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Long under Burt

A great debate is raging in the Administration over the proposed \$25 billion mobile missile system. The President's decision may determine the Senate vote on SALT II.

By Richard Burt

In October 1977, a giant SS-19 intercontinental ballistic missile lifted off its launch pad at the Tyuratam rocket base in the southwestern Soviet Union and thundered its way eastward toward the Pacific Ocean. Only seconds into its flight, the ICBM's first and second stages dropped away, leaving its third stage — the "business end" of the weapon — to continue across central Asia. Somewhere over the Yellow Sea, the third stage began to execute a series of small but precise maneuvers. As it did so, six dummy nuclear warheads were ejected over the vicinity of their imaginary targets. The warheads plopped harmlessly into the ocean.

Although the entire test took less than 30 minutes, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense spent the next several weeks pouring over its implications for the strategic balance. Drawing on data picked up by electronic listening posts in Turkey and Iran, spy ships stationed in the Pacific and reconnaissance satellites overhead, a team of American scientists, computer specialists and intelligence experts was able, by December, to report its findings in a top-secret memo to Adm. Stansfield Turner, the C.I.A. director, and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown.

The memo brought bad news. Couched in highly technical language, it informed the Government's top national-security aides that the Soviet Union's most prestigious military arm — the Strategic Rocket Corps — had made dramatic, and unexpected, progress in upgrading the accuracy of its most lethal missiles. Specifically, it said that the Soviet Union now possessed the ability to deliver thermonuclear weapons thousands of miles through space and bring them down within a few hundred yards of their predetermined targets. And if these targets happened to be the United States' 1,054 intercontinental missiles buried in underground silos in the American Middle West, this was close enough for the Soviet weapons to rupture the silos and destroy the missiles.

This finding abruptly ended a drawn-out and divisive debate in intelligence circles over when, if ever, Moscow would have the capacity to launch a "first-strike" attack against the American land-based nuclear deterrent. Now, a year and a half later, Mr. Carter's national-security aides acknowledge that this could happen as early as 1981, when the Soviet Union should have completed deploying some 500 SS-19 missiles and about 300 SS-18's (an even bigger ICBM that is equipped with 10 warheads). The Administration is torn over the question of what, if anything, the United States should do about the emerging Soviet missile threat.

The United States Air Force has offered its answer in the form of a major new weapons program it calls the "Missile Experimental," or MX. In effect, the Air Force's proposed missile system would offer a two-step solution to the vulnerability of the Minuteman ICBM force. Like the new generation of Russian ICBM blockbusters, the missile would be highly accurate and equipped with as many as 10 separate, independently targeted warheads, or MIRV's. This would give Washington the means to match Moscow in what defense analysts like to call "silo-busting" capability — the ability to launch pinpoint attacks against the opposing side's missile forces. But more important, unlike the existing Minuteman ICBM, the MX would not be housed in underground silos; in fact, it would be the nation's first mobile intercontinental missile.

Not surprisingly, the Air Force's MX proposal has not gone down very well in some quarters. With a price tag of at least \$25 billion, it has not been difficult for opponents of the mobile missile to find support from politicians who oppose such an investment in an era of fiscal austerity. Meanwhile, environmentalists are not cheered by the idea of having nuclear-armed missiles traveling around the countryside on trucks,

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